LETTERS TO WOMEN

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LETTERS TO WOMEN

BY

JOSEPH AUSLANDER

Frontispiece Woodcut and Decorations by
CLARE LEIGHTON

Publishers
HARPER & BROTHERS
New York *and* London
MCMXXIX

PS
3501
U67
L4

LETTERS TO WOMEN

Copyright, 1929, by Harper & Brothers

Printed in the U.S.A.

SECOND PRINTING

L-D

15318

Jan '38 Stechert 1.33 (Carnegie)

DEDICATION

To all women for the sake of one woman

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

To the editors of *Books*, *Herald Tribune* and *Palms* the author is indebted for permission to reprint, in the order named, the *Letter to Elinor Wylie* and the *Letter to Emily Dickinson.*

APOLOGY

I HAVE *written these Letters to Dead Ladies because in these women, singly and severally, I found certain qualities of mind and heart, outside the fascination of their personalities, which we are in desperate need of today. I have chosen dead ladies with something like malice prepense, being assured that they had lived and were done with living;—and, by that token, aware of their intense timelessness—having free access to their wisdoms and their follies; knowing that I should not trespass upon the sacred precincts of the soul. Furthermore, it was so much safer than writing letters to ladies alive* (*and, if anything, less contemporaneous*), *with husbands in the offing somewhere.*

Here, at least, I could let go. I could tell certain illustrious ladies what I had always wanted to tell them, and what, had I known them in the flesh, I should probably never have hoped or dared to tell them. Being dead, they were no longer possessive or possessed. I was at liberty to speak out. I could talk tenderly and proudly to Sappho. I could feel with Lot's wife, understanding the salty necessity of her decision. I could have it out with Fanny Brawne. I could hold vivid converse, in the Northwest Passage of that old house at Amherst, with the mischievous and dazzling imp, Emily Dickinson—asking her *questions this time! I could tell that lovely little child-wife of Edgar Poe what nobody has ever thought of telling her. I could, in some measure, repay La Duse for a certain moment without which I should have walked the poorer in spirit these many years. I could have one more robustious resounding talk with Amy Lowell—and how she could talk! I could cry* Salve atque vale *to Elinor Wylie, glittering ambiguously still, revealed in defiant flashes, riding the fox and hunting the unicorn and wearing always on her spacious forehead the sardonic and lonely stigmata.*

But aside from this desire for personal satisfaction, I felt cued to these letters by a deeper wish and a darker intention. In a word, I really wanted to write to every woman, to woman as woman in a society directed and dominated by women. Standing squarely in the moral tradition of English poetry, I determined to hail the living by saluting the dead; and, which is most important, to discuss with my dead ladies, as of today, certain problems in ethics upon the honest solution of which, it would appear, our entire civilization pivots. Women have always been more audacious in conduct and more conservative in principle than men. By birthright and by custom, that is their paradoxical privilege. They are the moral barometers of an age. Men are blustering little cowards who never grow up. Perhaps Oscar Wilde was in the right when he said, "The history of woman is the history of the worst form of tyranny the world has ever known—the tyranny of the weak over the strong. It is the only tyranny that lasts."

At any rate, I have written these letters, such as they are, to women. And if a living woman is a tyrant, a dead woman is a despot. For the dead ride harder than ever—none harder, indeed, than these eight, hand-picked from a brilliant procession, because, taken together, they defined, for me, the full and various woman. The letter form moved admirably to my purpose. By its very nature, it admitted ease and fluency of address; it established at once a level of intercourse which could be friendly without offense and intimate without confusion. It bristled, too, with possibilities of novelty and freshness. Moreover, it is woman's peculiar invention and delight.

Tyrants, the slave is finished!

JOSEPH AUSLANDER

NEW YORK CITY
9 May 1929

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PREFATORY EPISTLE

DEAR LADIES, dead and most unconquerable,
Most curiously alive beneath the lilies,
Still is our little buzz of heaven and hell,
And still is
The fruit to Paris, the frenzy to Achilles.

We have not pushed a millimeter beyond
The Wooden Horse, the clash of steel on bone;
Though Helen is less private and more blond,
Men groan
For her, and grunt for Circe, and eat stone.

Men wive and wench as always, being men;
As always, women feed with lips unfed
Their cruel hungers; always Magdalen
For bread
Breaks her dark breasts upon a sleepless bed.

Shall I exclaim with Browning, "Here they are,
My fifty men and women!"? . . . One and seven—
And women only, sharp and singular,
Driven
One way or another, toward the same hard heaven.

Of none of any of these can it be told
That she was flat or feeble; even she
Who died so young, being in pain so old,
Could be
More than a pale melodious Annabel Lee.

And one there was, high-nostrilled fiery one,
Who rather than endure against her lips
An old man's mouth or feel an old man run
His fingertips
Over her brow and breasts, burned like a nun

With other nuns in strange forbidden blisses,
Knowing the quick and harsh satieties
Of men; and there was one who drank fierce kisses
That freeze
The heart and heart's blood, binding hands and knees

With ice; and one there was, for good or ill,
Who by her beauty set a seal upon
High song's most brief and bitter codicil—
The one
Who breathed a death into Endymion.

And that austere and lavish lady whose
Haggard latin eyes held all despairs,
All fugitive exultations; who renews
And tears
Dead hearts with dreams half hers and wholly theirs.

And that naïve New England sprite, more gnome
Than nun; that tiny imp in church who—sneezed!
With Joan and with Jezebel at home:
Who teased
The Lord with questions—and went unappeased.

The most embarrassing and peculiar elf
That ever ran along a blood-streaked road
Crying shrill riddles—answering them herself.
She showed
Jehovah how to solve the Sphinx in code

That must be read by lightning; and that lonely
Lady of fire and crystal who was born
To suffer passion phœnix-like and only
In scorn
Of her own furious blood, with jewelled horn

And silver hounds and narrow golden does,
A new Diana pricked out cap-a-pie,
In armour of proud glass, with a glass rose,
Swept by,
Plume flashing—and heart beating foolishly.

And that prodigious advocate, with vision
And voice to roar it down the world, who stood
Against the apathy and faint derision,
The feud
Between her purpose and her private blood,

And, tortured in the flesh and mortified
In the sick solitary heart, became
A strength that swung a sword from side to side,
A name
Like a shout at night, like a flame lost in flame!

Tennyson had his gallery of women
More or less "fair"; well, here you are, my ladies,
All sisters and all Puritans—quite human—
Whose trade is
Being remembered, though it were in Hades.

Being too vivid, too alive, too much
A part of beauty and our common pain,
Too near to lose and too remote to touch:
The stain
Of moonlight on the hand, the sound of rain.

If, therefore, various ladies, in this book,
(Which is a dial's shadow to record
The golden accidents of light) this look,
That word,
Twisted by time, more overheard than heard,

Should stick too fiery off; or if, in heat,
Our modern breed of harpies, that would rend
Even the Lord's Last Supper, smell this meat
And bend
Their beaks and talons to a certain end—

Nevertheless, I do entreat your laughter,
The ghostly laughter of a ghostly clan:
Brave ladies lived before Freud and will after;
Nor can
Hooks shift the status of Leviathan.

Letter to Elinor Wylie

Beauty's pure pathetic shape;
The trap I never shall escape;
The heavenly bait; the honey breath
Issuing from the jaws of death. . . .

—ELINOR WYLIE
Chimaera Sleeping

Letter to *Elinor Wylie*

But in her web she still delights
To weave the mirror's magic sights,
For often through the silent nights
A funeral, with plumes and lights,
And music, went to Camelot:
Or when the moon was overhead,
Came two young lovers, lately wed;
"I am half-sick of shadows," said
The Lady of Shalott.

I will not burden you with pleasant words,
That being neither here nor there with these
Volleys of major sevenths and minor thirds,
The gaudy salvos, the loud eulogies.

Loving your silence, I will not intrude;
Feeling your jewelled scorn, I will not praise:
Shall I dispute the eagle's solitude?
Or bell the fox? Or hood the falcon's gaze?

Let me not join the general shout, the sounds
Of the strident pack that loves the noise it makes—
You turn Actaeon to your own swift hounds;
You twist Laocoon to your own snakes.

You were a sort of golden Puritan,
And, by your own confession, loathed the riches
That swarm the languid valleys: so you ran
With antelopes upon precarious niches,

Pasturing a hard frozen salt that burned
And glittered on the tongue; the taste of ledges
Tingled; the palate of your soul discerned
Amid a muddled world the gleam of edges.

The casual and clumsy bastinado
Of time and circumstance upon the mind
Found you entrenched in beauty and bravado,
Fiery as frost, as fire and ice defined.

What did we know who looked upon your pallor?
What could we guess who saw your level eyes?
Under the brown poised wings of hair what valour
That is most frightened when it most defies?

As in the flesh of Tyrian stuff the streak
Of thread stitched in like blood; the purple vein
Gasping through anguished marble; the proud beak
Honed on its own breast—such was your disdain.

And such the scrupulous passion, the astute
Tyranny of perfection, that the word
Hung like some perilous and silver fruit,
Swung from the hair of gold a flashing sword.

For you had stared upon that Face whose flame
Dazzles the eyeball dark; and in your heart
You knew that nothing could be quite the same
Again save in the livid truth of art.

There was the rampart! There the bright escape!
There the brief mercy that is merciless!
There with cold wings the high and shadowy shape
Imprisoning the fugitive they bless!

O restless heart! O deft and ravenous brain
Whose diamond arithmetic devoured
Confusion—only to be lost again
After the stringent epithet had flowered!

Did the sharp mischief of the mind demand
The heart's submission? Was the woman broken
To the brain's brilliant whip, the brittle hand,
The crystal phrase that splinters being spoken?

Was love too much of chaos?—the hot senses,
The breath disturbed, the blood's rebellion shaking
Your delicate Eden with its recompenses?
The glass bird trembling? The glass blossoms breaking?

If love prevail, how should the mind maintain
Her fierce fastidious empire? Dispossessed
Of love, how should the banners of the brain
Stretch upon what wind, stream upon what crest?

O Blake in chain mail, and both Emilies,
And brightly bitterly yourself withal,
The silver and unwithered lilies freeze;
The song suspended, the leaf cannot fall!

She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces thro' the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
She look'd down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side;
"The curse is come upon me," cried
The Lady of Shalott.

Letter to Amy Lowell

Suddenly I am lonely:
Where are you? . . .

Madonna of the Evening Flowers

Letter to *Amy Lowell*

Amy Lowell, of Brookline, Massachusetts,
One of the Lowells that would talk with God,
And with God only, what is all this chatter
Of the proud little girl, the Puritan
Bookish and pampered, who would be a poet
In spite of flesh, conventions, dollars, even
In spite of being a Lowell of the Lowells?
What is this blab of giving plays in Boston
On Sunday afternoons! Nay, if you please,
Domiciling actresses and such
At *Sevenels* beneath ancestral noses!
Forcing "free verse" on *The Atlantic Monthly!*
And with barbed prefaces and black cigars
And such robustious periwig-pated thunder
As Luther's ink-well spattered on the Devil

Hammering at the fortresses of Boston
Your gusty purpose, serving Whigs and Tories
Alike with notice of a new Tea Party
Minus the tea, but fragrant with cigars
And ultimatums!

O erratic scandal
Clacking over the cups of Beacon Hill!—
And have you heard! . . . Buzz, buzz! . . . And have you seen! . . .
Buzz, buzz! . . . And do you know she . . . this! . . . and that! . . .
And the proud vestibule and drawing room
Is now become nocturnally a shambles
With shibboleths in various agonies
Expiring under furniture everywhere!
And buzz, buzz! . . . Is it possible? . . . So-and-so
Told me this morning over the telephone
That her maid told her she was told last night
By a cousin of her—Miss Lowell's—chambermaid
That she—Miss Lowell, I mean—affects a sort
Of sacred pent house under the roof where she
Swarms in pontifical dimensions, fussing
With secretaries, sheep-dogs and kimonos,
Typewriters going like mad and maids pell-mell,
And visitors and breakfasts, lunches, fires,
Electric fans and bandages and bundles
Of manuscripts, and pencils sharp as needles
And blunt long black cigars! Would you believe it,

My dear? . . . Incredible! . . . Now whisper "Bedroom!"
And hear her gasp, O Snapper-Up of Trifles!
The bedroom tuned to levees and redundant,
Like all the house from cellar up to attic,
With books and books and books and—say it—bed!
Ah, there's a morsel she will choke on rather
Than lose the relish of it in a gulp!
For this, O Harpies and Professional Hounds
Of Heaven, I would have you understand
This is no ordinary bed, is this,
But something in its way not quite unworthy
The ingenuity of King Procrustes,
Though hardly so promiscuous, that is;
And not susceptible to alteration
In size or occupant; and, as for comfort,
The numerous pillows and the much adored
And equally beshrewed and faithful helot
Who smacked the pillows for her whimsical mistress
Gave sturdy warrant as to that, I warn you;
The Genius of this castle, like the waif
Who proved true princess in the fairy tale,
Would just as soon detect the pea that pinched
Though it were smothered under twenty pillows.

What matters eight o'clock or nine o'clock
Of a summer's evening to our noble lady?
Let come the dinner guests. Let *them* be prompt!
The crimson car of privilege swings in, purring;

The yellow lights like cat's eyes rock across
The dark green hedges; scissored evergreens
Sparkle their cones like cressets to renew
The fireflies that fill the sunken garden
With fugitive golden lamps; the bougainvillea,
Spattering purple stars along the terrace,
Glitters in silver point beneath the lights
Spraying like fountains . . . while a minor poet,
Some timid bardling with "Harvard" on his forehead,
Even your servant, Milady, (in more senses
Than he knows now) is being slowly nibbled,
Not without some contempt, by seven sheep-dogs,
Dynastic darlings fresh from lording it
Over their abject slave, yourself, Milady;
Fresh from the seven deep punctilious basins
Of food to which this pallid bardling offers
But desperate dessert, such as it is,
Till, by the celtic intervention of
Timothy and the tinkling silver bell,
The bardling, through the rich manorial gloom,
Limps in with one iambic foot—and the time—
Considerably out of joint to find
Floors of traditional glass, extravagant vistas
And that voluptuous Victorian table
Where sits the black and silver adjutant
Of our most absent imperturbable Diva,
Dispensing courtesy and lichee nuts
And candied pear, the while our tyrant dallies
Sans diamonds and beryls, unabashed,

A little girl, her brown hair looped up—so—
(All this between the filet and the roast
From the silver adjutant) her flowered robe,
As virginal as her mood, swishing along
Blue lupin walls with a sweet thready whisper,
Against the pallor of the Japanese prints
Plum blue, but much less blue and not more mild
Than the novitiate's vapour-softened eyes.
For she has elvish intervals, though her bath,
Enormous bath-room and the flash and crackle
Of orders, taunts, intransigent entreaties,
(All saved somehow from grimness by a warm
And buoyant boisterousness) though these are part
Of equipage and incantation vital
To her whose person and whose verse insist
Upon applause, affection, anything
But dullness or indifference or neglect.

Ah there, my Prima Donna of the poets,
There is the secret of your entourage,
Your adoration of La Duse, your
Jealous delight in your dark silver friend,
Both actresses, and you no less an actress,
Even in your hieratic opulence
And those luxurious insulations from
The world you scorned and slapped and ridiculed
And coaxed and cozened and compelled to listen
(And feared, in ambush, with a naked heart
On fire); there is the secret that consumed

Fiercely within, gnawing with sullen teeth
And driving you in a desperate regimen
Self-trapped, in frenzied circles, self-destroyed.
It is your terrible loneliness, terrible
Always, but here most bitter, Amy Lowell.
From the first cruel awareness of the gap
Between the flesh and exquisite victories;
The first hot anguish and resentment forced
Back and in upon itself to smoulder
Proudly and privately; the natural hopes
Of love banked up and checked; the natural gifts
Of mind pressed into dazzling double service;
The masculine assumptions; barricades
Of bone in conflict with lace net and satin;
Books against flowers; belligerent manifestos
Against the autocratic wistfulness;
Staccato tones, erecting silver lances
Against the intimate stillness, dark and lonely,
Throbbing under the heart of every woman—
And under your heart cheated and choked down
With something savage in its emphasis
Upon the mental music.

I have seen
Your mouth and eyelids tremble, and have felt
Some swift affectionate anguish moving there
Like a sudden gust that flattens, driven back
Darkening; in your eyes that snapped and sparkled
Like bright blue stones in sunlight I have watched

A shadow black and brief as wind or cloud
Strike through and vanish leaving, as storm leaves,
Unnatural vehement lustre and the sense
Of sad implicit paradises lost
Forever.

But to all the world you turned
The vivid polka-dotted mask, the tricks
And trappings of a legend which they loved
Because it shocked them or perplexed or passed
For triumph of a sort they understood
Without approving of it and indeed
Without in the least knowing why. You forced
A heavy comfort-sodden age where wealth,
Social prestige and indolence strangely mixed
With skyscrapers and energies and wants
Known but unnamed, denied, despised, rejected—
You forced that age to pay for poetry,
To buy it and to read it. You, St. Paul
To the Corinthians, cracking acrid whips
Over their heads and whistling them to heel.

What else were all the circus pranks about?
The side-shows and the ballyhoo? What else
This business of appearing at the Symphony—
The Sacred Boston Symphony—with a friend
A footstool and a front row all together?
That famous extra-watt lamp at your lectures;
That quarterly Assyrian descent

Upon the Hotel Belmont, terrifying
The humdrum hostelry to a wondrous fever
Of preparation for the potentate.
From cellars and from furnaces the swarthy
Familiars popped, the subterranean forces
Apprised by grapevine tremors of your advent,
Subalterns in the garrison of comfort,
Bellhops and elevator runners, all
Standing at swift devotion. And the eighth floor!
The skittering panic where, in half an hour,
Each massive mirror in the lavish suite
Must, like so many Hamlets, undergo
A customary suit of solemn black;
Each clock be strangled; and Heaven help that waiter
Who lagged an instant with the rapid pitchers
Of ice water or did not begin at once
To tune up the brisk dinner knives! And Heaven
Have mercy on the floor maid who forgot
The gentle linen and the generous pillows
Bulging like fatted geese! Rumour has caught
Your Highness, neither splendid nor serene,
Dressed in some fine dark cloth as dense with fuzz
As any chick, doggedly packing feathers
From pillow to pillow at two o'clock in the morning!

And rumour was your slave no less than those—
Headwaiters, switch-board girls and editors,
(Whom you would summon and permit to print
According to your pleasure) chefs, reviewers,

Publishers, columnists, and book collectors,
Chauffeurs, musicians, actresses and critics,
Rivals of whose renown your candour stood
In cordial jealousy and admiration.
So you engrossed in one way or another
Not only your immediate myrmidons,
But all who touched upon your personal world
Which, like your poems, was a dear deception,
A strange adventure, curiously fixed
By the stubborn facts of flesh and poetry,
Maintained with gold, imperial paradox
Of asiatic appetites in Brookline,
The Mogul lost in a New England garden,
The Queen of Cappadocia pattering down
In a blue tobacco fog into the cellar
To tinker with the furnace (called "Matilda")
Or piling on her ample hearth the logs
Sliced to her hand to serve her solitude
In the long vigilant night. . . .

We were at dinner,
Some hundred lines ago, and I was chatting
With Ada Russell, soul of polished silver,
When from the head of the superb stairs rang
That rich salute like bugles, and we rose
And turned and looked up where like a green wave
You shimmered darkly down and took your place,
Glittering with delight, your blue eyes dancing
In pulses of excitement, full of brave

Broad humour, something of Sam Johnson streaked
With glints of steel and gleam of battle-axes,
Your palate as fantastic and robust
In food as that Leviathan's, your fervour
In conversation quite as prodigal, Lady—
Fox and tiger—whetted to devour
Behemoth—or the terrified little poets
Gaping and gasping at your table, while
You talk like your own poems, splintering
Colours hard and clean as onyx, spinning
Phrases in prismatic whorls that flicker
Jewels of fire at all facets, blazing
Through books and obscure regions of the brain
And dusty archives till they burst in flame
Kindled by that quick wonder about Men
And Women and Ghosts and that electric joy
In locking mind with mind and coming to grips
With controversial metal and that passion
For eminence and the pure thunder of thought
And the word coiled up like lightning and the love
Of audience to defeat the taste of ashes,
Gray roses, brittle vials of vinegar.

For in your cosmos, perfect, unprecarious,
Your loneliness could somehow celebrate
That hectic victory which the actual terms
Of life refused. This was your Genesis:
Here you might brood over a dim desire
And watch the word fulfilling it begin

To stir and spread and palpitate like some
Slow glow-worm staining the darkness in your garden
A smoky emerald. Yes, you could hold it
Luminous, alive, cup it in the hollow
Of your quick hand. This was your universe—
The palpable projection of your will;
Resounding with your fiats; filled with you;
Perfumed with your cigars and spiced with perils
Spun like some painted fictions to confront
And spend your vigour upon in fantasy.
Therefore, at *Sevenels*, no act or phrase
Dared cast a casual shadow. All was keyed
To your vitality, pitched up to accord
With the shrill trumpets of your mind and thus
Italicized and underlined and made
Significant like exclamation points
To cue the daily drama with as many
Climaxes as possible.

Ah, you actress!
Imperious and pitiful and proud
And such a child in your affections, such
An ogre too in vast magnanimous gestures
That could include your friends, your enemies,
The black cat, Mr. Winky, and John Keats—
This "Mister John Keats five feet high" for whom
You drained your veins out in a dark libation,
Pouring the literal sacrifice of blood
To him so strictly cherished. Since, it seems,

By the abyss and heavy fraud of time,
You could not warm his hands at *Sevenels*,
(Those hands that had the damp of death upon them)
Surround his sickness and his loneliness
With ministrations of your love, or summon
Physicians of the finest, the most loyal
Of nurses, jealously usurp their places
In the black watches at his bed, or bring
Fanny and him together, or at last
Erase the agony of those "posthumous" months
In Rome by merciful opiates, all else
Failing, all succour futile. So you cut
Your heart out for his sake, so stretched the nights
Of dedicated solitude until
This poet, more than any unfulfilled
As poet and as lover, found in you
And in your equal unfulfillment his
Compassionate victory and vindication—
In your womb locked so bitterly and long
Endymion was restored, restated, stilled
As you in him found your most mortal purpose
Fully defined, identified as woman
And poet. For the same implacable reason
Fixed in the cheated heart, devouring flesh,
Rejecting him beneath some violets,
Denying you with lilacs—that same reason
Confirmed your labour, ratified your faith,
And consecrated on your forehead fillets
Of withering fire, the caustic flowers of death.

I cannot think of you and death together—
The terms are not synonymous. Four years
Of stubborn absence from felicity
Are four years, more or less, of marking time
By clocks and calendars and little cults
Incubated into the world to cheep
On Easter Sundays. Many a false Jesus
Buzzes abroad in the land, relieving ladies
Of inhibitions in Miami, calling
Upon the name of poetry in parlours—
The swamis and the yogis and the what-nots
Issuing papal nuncios for lyrists
Whose husbands trespass heavily in Delphi,
Stumbling like bewildered ghosts through rooms
Devoted to the asphodel, and searching
For a lone mutilated sandwich left
Miraculously from the locust swarm,
Or straining somewhere in the fringe for one
Familiar accent—only to wander feebly
(Consoled somewhat by Jenkins and the siphon)
Up into bed without Eurydice.

I cannot think of you and death together—
The most unposthumous person that ever lived
Is hardly cancelled by an epitaph;
And though we smear bitumen on your mouth
The brilliant wizardry still glitters there
Of words that burned like golden standards captured
From chaos, dark with blood, but with the sun

Laughing upon them. You were such a force
That not since Whitman boomed our Jerichos
Into oblivion, had moved among us.
What should I tell you now? The state of song
In Denmark—or New York? Deaths? Dissolutions?
Alarums, menaces and maledictions?
The satraps and the scandals and the schisms
That split our amities? Who's in? Who's out?
Who wins the Pulitzer this year? Shall I
Dish up for your delight the miserable
Pickings of the backstairs? Faugh! The rose
In the fine nostrils of our boudoir beagles
Will sooner reek of that which sniffed at it
Than savour of itself. Well, we have poets,
A few, who walk through lonely twilights telling
Hard truths in parables to a small clan.
And every new apartment on Parnassus
Is leased or sub-leased to the multitude
Still harping upon hollyhocks; or else
Ransacking sex and feeling little glows
Of naughty wisdom glide along their spines;
Or we have singers who insinuate
Slenderly at fifty cents a line
Their delicate raptures over little things
That hurt them, being beautiful. But where
Is that one lion which this den of Daniels
Might yap at? Where are all our poet-priests
Who should go up before the jealous gods
And read the entrails and make augury

For all the people? How shall we endure
Egypt? Who shall strike the sterile rock
Of our confusion and our weariness
To quench us? They who once warned emperors
And shook the world with dreams and prophecies—
What have they for our bedlam? What full word
For our bewilderment to eat? "The hungry sheep
Look up and are not fed." Our prose-men pander
To quick-lunch appetites or precious whims;
Our pulpits ruminate an ancient cud—
There is no milk in them. And the old business
Of making god goes profitably on
In one way or another, and every way
As like, at bottom, as one goose is like
Another cackling home to Camelot
Or Bethlehem or Mecca or Chicago.
We charge our baseness to some starry fault,
As though the Dragon's Tail and Ursa Major
In stealthy heat conniving with our blood
Had set the constellations like a trap,
And by a planetary trick contrived
To horn us all. Tsst! We are Adam's whelp,
Though all the chastity of heaven twinkle
Over our oats and origins forever.

I cannot think of you and death together.
Your courage and your gaiety and that
Intensity in all things—and your talk—
We shall not hear such talk again; at least

Not here, not now. We have no time for talk.
But even now and even here your voice,
O voluble ghost, rings like a hundred bells,
No two alike, the music of your mind
To which flame back the high lights of the chairs,
Illustrious tables and impanelled walls
Vigilant with the bravery of books,
A delicate Constable, a colour print,
White orchids stemmed in silver bowls—white fire,
Hearts of white fire frozen—sulphur roses
In jars of jade the green of curdled milk,
In black-wood pitchers like black swans with long
Black throats—red fire reflecting tones and tropes,
White silver mirroring agitated torches—
Surface echoing surface, rainbows of speech,
Fountains and flashing particles and patterns
And cadences; the sound of many voices
In one voice tossed against the tropic colour
Of Ada Russell, there sustained, there fixed.

I cannot think of you and death together:
I see you, exquisite and virile, fingering
Orchids and Havanas with authentic grace;
I hear you tenderly discuss Rachel—
Rachel, who wore beneath the silk and swank
Of Phèdre, Hermione or Mary Stuart,
The rags of the street gamin; yes, Rachel,
The skinny little Jewess singing songs
In cheap cafés for winesops; yes, Rachel

With dark and sullen Jewish energy
Burning and pounding in her blood and blazing
Out of her fingertips, out of her eyes,
Out of her mouth to such a music, it
Shook the romantics at the *Comédie*
In dust and powder down under a Voice!
I hear you talk of Duse—and the room
Becomes an altar smoking with sweet wine
And roses red as blood, the marble stained
The strange dark colour of old tears and blood.

We go out on the terrace and we step
On fallen stars of bougainvillea;
And in the sunken garden fireflies;
And in the porphyry pool the gold-fishes;
And the rich talk glittering in and out.
(In what melodious garden, striped with bees
And golden pleats of light, more resonant
Than stradivarius or cremona, filled
With the hot savage honey of sound, Milady,
Lover of gardens, do you now renew
The necessary and sonorous business
Of grackles and the Baltimore orioles,
The drowsy thunder in the rhododendron
And the syringa, dark industrial bass
Of bees, the pointed silver noise of water
Dripping piccolo notes on white stone somewhere?)

Midnight. Adieus are done. The woman steps
Along the somnolent stairs. . . . And in your library

(The fire and the silence and the curtains
Dismissing one reality for another
Less vulnerable, more capable of wounding),
In solitary self-confinement shedding,
Like Christabel, the armour of your world,
The brilliant bandages of being Lowell,
Slowly, with travail and convulsive frenzy,
The woman abdicates, dissolves; the poet
Emerges. . . . So the poem, too, comes aching
In minute ecstasies that rend you, leaving
Some drops of blood on ordinary paper,
A sound of swans that pierces, dying proudly,
A massive melancholy peace, a heart
Bled white but still unpacified, a woman
Suddenly lonely, suddenly afraid,
Stripped of her tinsel, standing in the darkness,
The theatre emptied, and the tawdry odour
Of paint still pungent in her nostrils, burning
Her eyes. . . . "Where are you, Ada Russell? And you,
My friends, where are you? I am all alone!
And I am frightened! See, I have a poem!
I have a poem to show you!" . . .

Dear.
It is evening.
The hour of departure—the hour of memories, of prayers.
One must hide everything and go to work.

From a letter

Letter to *Eleonora Duse*

I saw you once, La Duse, long ago,
Or so it seemed,
Or so
It came upon me and I dreamed—I dreamed;
Nevertheless I know
That in that hour
You were like sunset and a single tower
Trembling in dead light: I remember how
Your silver hair against your serious brow
Made of your eyes impulsive lamps that shed
Blackness like lustre over the heart dead
And over every word you said.
The flame in those deep sockets was the fire
Of shadow cast up from some fled
And unforgotten festival where flame—
Mixed with dread
And sharp desire
And music and confused with stars and taken
Like a tall city by night—stood alone and shaken
With shame,
Remembering betrayal and a name.

The play was *Ghosts*, of course,
And you were Mrs. Alving, siccant, thin,
Tortured with memories; your voice a pin
Scratching upon the brain
With whispered force
That half-hysterical refrain
"Spettri! Spettri!" the Ghosts come back again!
Ah, Duse, always the ghosts return!
You cannot kill them though you burn
Their souls out in a mortuary urn.
No matter who you were, no matter who—
A woman of Ibsen, Sudermann, Sardou,
Dumas, d'Annunzio—
That woman reading Vladimir's letter or waiting
With Santuzza—and hating, hating—
That woman with her nerves, her nausea, her flow
Of passion and languor and loneliness was—you!

You poured your heart
Into *La Citta Morta*, *Fedra*, *Paolo*—
Making them glow;
And with your art
Redeemed the phrases of a cold
Voluptuary into vehement gold,
Translating by a breath
The sensual ardours and the smell of death;
And with the motion of your hand,
More beautiful than light,
More bright,

Stirred like an angel's wand
The thunder pools of his melodious skill
Until
All that was dense and tropical in him became
Only the flame
Of your eyes and your voice . . . and you, so small,
So tired, so sick of it all,
Towered into something terribly tall,
A thousand statues in your step, your face
A river of stars, a holy place—
And the theatre shook

With your body's brilliance like a look!
You would go on the stage
With that strange long stride,
Walking as though there were mountains at your side;
Clothed only in the glamour
Of your intensity,
With no claptrap, no clamour,
No make-up, no mummery;
Standing there
With your gray hair—
The mother, the mistress, the wife—
Confessing life
As it is—sordid, insupportable, sublime;
Admitting time
Uncorseted,
With heavy breasts sucking the grief
Of the world, heavier than lead
With late bitter brief

Milk, with heart as dead
But deep as the sea
To drink, to drown all tragedy,
Smiling like death a little wistfully.

So liquid and so level you were
In your truth that the theatre
Burned through your soul as might an hour
Of twilight make a torch of some dark flower;
Found in your luminous face a cup
To fill with bitter beauty up;
And in your eyes
Tears of fire held under and straining to rise;
And in your words
Terror and tenderness like sea birds
Trapped in something foreign and exact—
Breaking their wings against the Fact.

So you would give
As in a mirror, compassionate and purgative,
The illusion of some loftier shape
Than this, the shadow of escape,
A new dimension, a new stream
Of strength, a dream that we could dream,
So clear, so close, so confident, so free
That through its own perfection we
Could come back, proud, exalted for a space,
As though there were music on our face,
To bear again the assault on body and heart and mind
Of the reality we left behind.

Thus implicated, but not involved,
Your art revealed but never solved,
Never concluded; you sat apart
Regarding the carnival, but in your heart
Aloof, wearing no bells; you contemplated
The hectic laughter and created
Against the chaos of the world
A solitude where you might keep
Without stain,
Unfurled,
And inaccessibly steep—
Whatever might or might not be—
Your privilege of pain,
The flag of your soul's essential and serene integrity.

Death said, "So,
La Duse, it is time to go:
The stage is dimmed for the final tableau"—
Not amid the grapes and olives, the gold and silver of your
Asolo—
Not there, although . . .
Not there, but in a city of harsh smoke-blackened snow. . . .
The rest we know:
That night in Pittsburgh—the blizzard—shut out
From the stage door by some ghastly doubt—
Shivering in the dingy yard. . . .
That night in the play—breathing hard—
(Who was the Porter with his foot in the door?
With his back against it?—as so often before—

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As this last time for you—and then no more). . . .
The miserable hotel
After the play, after the applause, after
The curtain fell,
After the sobs, the laughter,
After the bell . . .
Fever. Your white small face flushed. Your eyes
Hot coals. The frightened company. Their cries.
Your silence. The Doctors looking wise.
But in their hearts (which cover
The frigid certainty) knowing this play is over.
Already the thin music in your ears
Of a ghostly audience's ghostly tears
And pale approval rustling in flat palms.
The silver alms
Of the Shears
Clicking through the damp discoloured cloud
Of your hair . . . beyond the rude
Clatter of living, beyond the mortal feud
Of the flesh and the proud
Spirit unbowed,
Though broken . . . feeling the shroud
Cool against you, and the roses pressed
(Still wet upon their hot-house stems)
In crisp efficient diadems,
Upon the streaked soft hair like artificial gems . . .
Feeling the tight
Earth at your breast (the sick sad world's breast)
Like teeth that drain their nurse deliciously to rest. . . .

The tower
Flames in blinding darkness—you point a hand—(that hand!)—it flames
Like a flower
Of light . . .
Your mouth is immortal with names . . .
The tower flashes—
Crumples. You whisper—(that whisper!)—"Look!
Shelley's ashes!
He is walking
The waves . . . La Porta Chiusa—Sola!" . . .
You stop talking. . . .

You haven't got an Aunt Emily. Your aunts are just common auntie aunts.

Aunt Sue's progeny to less fortunate contemporaries

Letter to *Emily Dickinson*

They speak of you as a recluse
In dull commiserative sighs:
As though denial were a ruse,
As though your bravery were lies,
As though it smelled of something pale
And sacrificial to prevail
Against the flesh, against the heart;
As though your wry and radiant art
Were like the shed of silver mail
That sits upon the frightened snail;
As though a "No" instead of "Yes"
Had labeled you an anchoress;
As though the nail, the blood, the tear,
The terrible whisper, the red spear,
The lantern and the fatal kiss
Were somehow love's antithesis!

They could not hear your little moan,
Your fingers tugging at the stone;
They could not know you tall and risen
Nor understand how tight a prison

The world can build with liberty:
And how miraculously free
Courage with both feet fast in hell
Can be; they see, but not so well:
They never see the light that spills
Like stars among your daffodils;
Nor in your orchard ever guess
The shy feet of your loneliness.

Balboa of your fate, you stared
On a Pacific none had dared:
The salt remorseless wrench and roll
Of the unplumbed and single soul.
But you, supplied by bird and bee
With telegrams of eternity,
With bulletins that were stripped to serve
The spirit's naked bone and nerve;
You in your garden in the sun,
Or in the day when there was none,
You were aware, oh so aware
Of something fiercer than despair:
The terrible consuming beauty
Of what a dead age once called duty:
Of what our age of public paint
And public love and unrestraint
In all things else considers now
As out of date as any vow:
As hopelessly old-fashioned as
The lovely thing your silence was.

But we, what do we know beyond
The moment's spurious diamond:
The clever phrase, the fulsome stress
Upon each other's cleverness—
Until a maudlin stupor steals
Into our muddled heads and heels,
And on the sickened brain beats only
The frantic whimper, "Lonely! Lonely!"
For never were we lonelier
Than now: Oh never, never were
Men and women so afraid
Of being alone, or so dismayed
At prospect of an hour that delves
Into their dark bewildered selves,
Recoiling from the hell that darts
In fiery hungers from their hearts.
The soiled, the sullen little boys
And little girls who drown with noise
The questions tapping canes on stone,
The blind implacable monotone:
Alone, alone, alone, alone.

And yet we sigh, "How much she missed—
The lovelorn sentimentalist!"
You who were filled: who broke the bread
Of dew and stardust and were fed;
Who broke the silver fish and ate
The banquet of the Potentate;
Who shut the door on world's delight

That turns to vinegar ere night;
Who shut the door and shook apart
The doors of Heaven with your heart;
Who in your Amherst garden found
The Passion and the bloody swound,
The red sweat dropping on the ground.

Emily with your eyes the colour
Of sherry; with your jasmin pallor;
The velvet cap upon that hair
Whose warm bronze caught a golden glare
When sunlight jewelled it; whose breath
Parted the red lips, the fine teeth
Tiny as a squirrel's; whose
Upper long lip could refuse
What the full underlip desired;
Whose spirit trembled and transpired
Through your sweet flesh like liquid light
That flashes on a summer night;
Whose ardent hand was like the flower
That shut its wings there for an hour;
Whose whisper was a moth, whose word
Shivered and piped like the small bird
Hidden in alders near some lake
When twilight and the heart both break.

Ah Emily, when you said "No,"
When you said "Never," when you said "Go,"
Did he hear what you said unsaid,
As, at the gate turning his head,

He saw your little head turned too,
And wept and went and suddenly knew
The Soul's superior instants (your
Phrase) those, only those endure?
The parted Guest, the unsipped wine.
The Meat untouched, the Palestine
Anticipated in the sense
Of some perpetual Imminence;
The shadow of His Palm upon
The brow of His Centurion.
Therefore in that terrific niche
Wherein you found yourself so rich,
So definite, so undefined;
In that enormous inch of Mind
As infinite as in the sea's
Pink shell thunder profundities,
Or in the acorn smoulders Oak,
Or Rome's blaze in a puff of smoke,
Or rainbows burn in the cocoon,
Or from her dead disk the new moon
Stretches a first faint velvet horn
And April's antlered night is born—
Therefore, clasping the Fact that is,
You found your glittering emphasis;
And then and vividly thereafter
The tinted bubble of your laughter
Lifted and sang from room to room
Of your triumphant daily tomb;
Under your domestic snood

The drama of the neighborhood
Gathered and groped and was resolved
To breathless notes whose wisdom halved
Bereavement or whose beauty doubled
The pleasures of the few untroubled.
With ungrammatical defiant
Ecstasies that tripped some giant
Neatly in a puckered phrase;
With programmes of the commonplace
In bird or flower keyed to such
Excitement by your dancing touch;
With your aerial gossip heard
At dawn, at dusk, from bee, from bird;
With private dialogues in plush
Reported by a rapid thrush;
With snowdrop symptoms on your lawn
The golden doctor of the dawn
Identifies as March's most
Premature and candid ghost;
With orioles, if you inquire,
Putting your cherry tree on fire;
With mole and mouse and twinkling ant
Imperial and nonchalant.
You knew the street and the blurred number
Of blossoms faint with recent slumber;
Arbutus on a rock, the wet
Unwarranted first violet
As yellow as a Louis-d'or,
The columbine like Kohinoor,

The adder's tongue, the trillium,
April's flag and April's drum
And April's flute more delicate
Than footfalls in the waxed estate
Whose polished corridors declare
Like bells the heart that tiptoes there.

To think of getting a poem tucked
With flowers, itself a flower plucked
Out of dark anguish, out of hope
To vindicate an envelope,
With red carnation for a stamp
As though the letter had a lamp!
Dear gentle daily household nun
Announcing sunset and the sun;
Self-shorn, self-kerchiefed, self-restored
Unto the enigmatic Lord;
Flying from a sulphurous God
To the Pearl Presence in the pod;
Striking from a rock that Moses
Never knew, the blood of roses;
Scaling Sinais with a noun
And in some black verb plunging down.
But always without compromise,
Always with accurate brown eyes
That would not veil the too uncouth
Or blur the vision of the truth:
As, when a girl, beneath the shade
The clustering syringa made,

Between the flutter and the shout
Of play you puzzled problems out;
Or in the dim delicious barn,
With sunlight like a spool of yarn
That snarled in interrupted gold,
Searching for freckled eggs to hold,
Your heart skipped like a mouse in danger
To see the sun enact the Manger,
Establish Bethlehem, decree
The Adoration of the Three,
Convert the straw to gold, the oat
To rubies, summon ass and goat,
And turn the powdered local air
To frankincense and fervent myrrh!

So always what you saw became
Translated from the wick to flame:
Through the dark crystal of your eye,
Curved by the soul's intensity,
Life and Love and Death would pass
In points of fire under glass:
The common agonies of life
Twisting like a casual knife
Into the heart, behind the brain;
The quick unstudied cloud of pain;
The massive hush, the marble breath,
The curt omnipotence of death—
All these dilated to a dot,
Magnified to a fiery knot

Beneath the frugal frosty lens
Of your dispassionate double sense.

But always, but above all, that
Intolerable magnificat:
The awful unknown sacrament
Of love, the luminous event
Whiter than death, the cheated lip,
The thwarted womb, the steady drip
Of blood and tears from bitter wicks
Upon the mutual crucifix.
How different from our dreary fashion
Of playing little games with passion,
The flippant and ironic mode
Of using love as episode,
Of chinning to the fourteenth line
To make a trivial valentine.

Ah well, when spurts another spring
Of grass and when your linnets sing,
Or when upon the eastern slopes
Your lilies and your heliotropes
Lure you to elude your Warden
And wander wistfully your garden
Like Enna's lonely child, like her
Slipping your jealous Kidnapper
To greet your robins back again,
Your larkspur and your cyclamen,
Sweet-william, pansy, pink and stock,
Your butterflies on every rock

Fugitively anchored to
A wharf of gold . . . O brief and blue
And bittersweet the summer goes,
Even your loyal pines, your crows,
With the immemorial rose.
And your autumnal hornet staggers
Drunk with drenched pears; golden daggers
Of corn stand stacked; the muffled sheep
In sun-dust, pink and silver, sleep.
And then the Cattle Show that starts
With fakirs' tents and peddlers' carts
That hurt so strangely. Then the snow
That follows on the Cattle Show,
Shutting you in, until there gleams
Your blue peninsula of dreams. . . .
And then the liquid spring once more
Rapping diamonds at your door—
And you so white, so small beside
The early blossoms like a bride:
The flowers lighted at your bed;
Your eyes, your mouth so quieted;
The brave thin hands like glass that wrote
Poems coloured like Joseph's Coat. . . .

No more, Emily: set the match
To me with your precise dispatch,
And smile my words out and redress
By your remote abstemiousness
The too inquisitive step, the bell
That blunders in your citadel.

She had seen that the finger of Death was upon her bosom—that, like the ephemeron, she had been made perfect in loveliness only to die. . . .

— Poe
Eleonora

Letter to *Virginia Clemm*

"Ah, broken is the golden bowl!"—
Virginia Clemm! Virginia Clemm!
The rust is on the aureole;
The dust is on the diadem:
My heart is gray with them.
Shut is the door, Lenore, Lenore!
How shall his livid lips resume
The ritual of "Nevermore,"
The revery of "Ulalume,"
The music of his doom?

O little cousin fugitive
As snow, as snowdrops, lovelier
Than one star in a silver sieve
Of lake water, more wan you were
Than Death's own chorister—
And whiter still against that dark
Decisive hair whose heavy blacks
And purples curved a startling arc

Over the oval's delicate wax
Where the lines of the throat relax.

Pale child-wife, what could you aver
Of him you loved, this man with eyes
Like fire, this whimsical Lucifer,
Wings dipped in blood, mouth sick and wise
With desperate Paradise?
What could you know of Poe, this Poe
Whose heart was its own bitter hell
Feeding, consuming him, whose brow
Was the fixed seat of ghosts that dwell
Always with Israfel?

You loved him—that was all you knew—
His ghastly moods, his tenderness,
Always his gray eyes brushing you
Like some remote mad passionless
Imperative caress;
Always the black terrific plume
Of his despair whose motion was
Dense with a desolate perfume
That stained the Many-Coloured Grass
And could not ever pass.

Perhaps you knew him best of all,
Loving him best, the whole of him,
Listening with him to the fall
Of the soft-footed seraphim

Or other guests more grim—
And growing steadily strangely more
Like one implacable image, till
The footfalls on the tufted floor
Tinkled and stopped—and Death stood still—
And listened—as Death will.

And the eyes of the man whose dream was Death
Fastened upon your eyes and shook
Them open like flowers, and your breath
Fluttered like wings beneath that look—
And he shut them like a book:
And the golden harp and the silver song
Were silent both; the cat, the coat
Were put away; and love more strong
Than life trembled in your bird throat
A last and lonely note.

Letter to Fanny Brawne

. . . Oh, Brown, I have coals of fire in my breast.

John Keats to Charles Brown, Naples,
1 November, 1820

Letter to *Fanny Brawne*

Dear Fanny, (How the name still glows!—
That cough! That shadow on the sheets,
Spotting them arterial rose,
Splashing them with hot heart beats!)
When Charles Brown in that fatal house
Said, "Miss Brawne, this is Mr. Keats,"
Little guessed your poet then
His Golgotha—his Darien.

Your buoyant colour like a wave
Of blood beneath your northern skin;
The nostril's accent; the blue cave
The laughter of your eyes brimmed in;
Your bright sharp breast that would not save
The sick and exiled paladin;
And all your hair's heaped yellow wealth
And the high music of your health—

All this proud and personal breath
Resented as the flesh resents
Delight of birth, delight of death—
The anguished soul's intelligence;
The conflict of the sword and sheath. . . .
The brain rebels, the heart prevents:
The bell is on the magic faun—
And he is murmuring, "Fanny Brawne."

And so the golden head, the great
Wind-shadowed eyes are yours, my dear:
They look so splendid on a plate—
And you can wipe your pretty spear.
The pale-mouthed prophet loves his fate,
The poet is your cavalier—
Though from a pot of basil bloom
Red leaves that mark an early doom.

And if he coughs, it is the rain;
And if he sings, it is your grace;
And if his teeth bite back the pain,
A towel or a shred of lace
Can quite remove the brilliant stain. . . .
O pitiless imperial face,
The tumult flushing to his cheek,
The dabbled feathers in the beak!

Milady, have we done you wrong?
Your pardon, then, for critics falter;
But he possessed you in his song—
You were his silence and his psalter:

To you his heights and depths belong,
The grapes, the garlands on the altar—
And your caprices that offend him,
And the sick jealousies that rend him.

Say that he magnified the fault
In the fiery torment of the senses,
Did you not drop occasional salt
On the quick flesh of his defences?
No matter now: the Roman vault
Locks his despairs and your pretences—
Along with letters that still heat
The heart beneath the winding sheet.

Letters he could not bear to read,
("—he has made me put 2 by—they tear him
to pieces—") letters that make him bleed
Merely to look at—we will spare him.
Your white carnelian is his Bead
And all his Rosary to declare him
Your martyr and your messenger.
("O Severn, do not speak of her!")

There is a grave. So let it be.
A quiet grave. ("O! I can feel
The daisies growing over me—
O for the quiet—") Should you steal
Upon it, ever so quietly
His heart of hearts would know that heel! . . .
He loved you, Fanny Brawne—too well—
Perhaps. . . . You were his Heaven—his Hell.

I shall be ever maiden. . . .

A fragment

Letter to *Sappho*

It is the evening, Sappho. In the evening
The bats weave soft black circles and their wings
Splash delicate ink upon the pale blue air.
It is the evening, Sappho. In the evening
Before the thunder you can smell the rain
Like powder, you can hear the moths and chafers
Thudding at screens and windows, whispering
Along the walls, lashing against the lamps.
It is the evening, Sappho. In the evening
The silver business of the spider fills
The fields: for in that heavy interim,
When lightning blooms upon a livid stem,
The spider, drawing beauty from his bowels,
Dresses the earth in nets of pearl and cloth
Of silver. . . . Strange, how many yards of silk
The spider wastes to catch one fly. And yet
How worth the cost. There is a wisdom, Sappho,

Which the world counts as folly: it consists
In wasting yards of silk to catch one fly.
And you, being a woman and a poet,
Must know the rich sagacity of waste,
Remembering that the poet who has salt
And passion in his blood has done it always,
Is doing it now, forever and forever,
As you did constantly, but to defeat
Somehow the industry of Death—to blunt
The frantic scissors, to maintain one thread
Against that narrow accuracy. For Death,
O Sappho, Death has hardly changed. She is
The same, tiptoeing about on slippered feet,
Clicking her teeth and sighing. . . . And the spider. . . .

To-morrow morning, after the rain, the grass
Will glitter when the sun stands on the hills
Stretching his arms (the same sun, lovely Sappho,
The very same as once in Lesbos). How
The grass will twinkle everywhere with webs!
Abandoned palaces! Tents of the Arabs
Blowing an empty splendour in the sun!
A city of stealthy silk and silver builded
So silently, so swiftly overnight
Between two flashes and a thunder clap—
Blue minarets and emerald pavilions—
And all for a few beaded flies, a few
Insects with freckled wings! . . .

Incredible

To think there will be a to-morrow morning,
And you will not be there. The caterpillar
Will walk in waves, but you will not be there.
Not you, though pigeons patter on the roof
With rainbows round their throats, and all the cocks
Brandish their scarlet plumes and blow alarums
Over the valleys, you will be so quiet;
Though ants like tiny black pearls tilt a leaf
Loaded with dew across a strenuous inch
Of earth, you will know nothing of these things.
Only the water scooping diamonds
Out of your eyes, O Lesbian; only the fishes
Fretting your nipples that had winced to feel
The exquisite teeth of Atthis, the red mouth
Of Erinna, pale, of the golden lyre; only
The cold Ionian nibbling at those fingers
That once had foraged secret fire and touched
The soul of music at the centre; only
The white sea-snake drowsing in the dark bed
That was your hair. . . .

No more the marble forehead

Flushed at the temples with blue veins like flowers
Throbbing, ravaged with kisses, kissed no more
But by the loose-lipped fishes, the dank garlands
Of seaweed. . . . Lovely Sappho, laurelled with fire,
Priestess of love and the smitten lute and the lute-strings,
Sterile—save in the song's womb, fierce and unfurrowed—

Save in the seedless blossom of song and the kisses
Burning like fire unfertile, the kisses raining
Like fire! . . .

Do you remember sprightly Gorgo
Whose chatter was a weariness? Do you remember
Megara and Anagora of Miletus?
Gongyla of Colophon, Mnasidica
Slim as a spear, soft-spoken? Do you remember
Dica, the delicate-fingered, twisting fillets
Of dill shoots and cold leaves? Have you forgotten
The nameless daughter of Polyanax?
Was it for Phaon that you left all this?—
The passionate congress of your lutes for him,
Whatever he was—boatman at Mytilene
Or shepherd with his black curls and white throat
And foolish whistle? Could you leave for him
Andromeda's little foot curled like a cloud
All silver over the croup of Pegasus?
Leave the full moon that made a sleepless flame
Of Lesbos and the temples glimmering
Upon the polished beach under the night
Inestimable and naked, under the acres
Of the ripe stars and lucid Pleiades?
Ah for Adonis! Ah, the vocal shell!
Ah for the roses of Pieria!
Ah for the proud capricious spur of Love!
The blood-red heel! The blackened bag of arrows!
The furious plume! Ah, Love with breasts of brass
And milk of madness! The brazier of the Goddess

Glowing with coals! The bronze divinely tortured!
The permanent lips that drink the perfect wine!

"Star-stationed incorruptible Aphrodite,
Daughter of Zeus, wile-weaver, I beseech thee
Break not my spirit with distress and anguish,
Lady of Passion!
Come to me now, if ever before in pity
Thou gavest ear, listening to me lonely,
Leaving thy father's golden house and gliding
With the yoked chariot
Pulled by the swift white sparrows plunging so softly
Over the dark earth: down the delightful heaven
Through the mid-ether, arriving rapidly
Thou, O God's daughter,
Smiling with mouth and with eyelids luminous,
Thou didst ask what now is befallen me,
Why I call now and what I now in my mad heart
Desire most dearly,
Saying, 'What Beauty now wouldst draw to thee?
Who wrongs thee, Sappho? For even she shall follow
Who flees, and if she rejects gifts, shall yet give,
Shall soon love thee,
However loth, if she loves thee not now, Sappho.'
Come, I pray thee, come now too, and release me
From the bright bitter agony, save and befriend me,
Ah Aphrodite!"

So you cried out to the giver of wounds, the spinner
Of fictions, sick with the acrid honey of love,

Knowing love dead, tasting the dust on the tongue—
"I loved thee—Atthis, of old time, ah once—
Atthis, long since—in old time overpast!"—
All that night at the Cliff cried out with the water
Washing the Cliff, "Ah, how shall I forget
Thy little ways, thy laughter, Anactoria?
Thine eyes more sapphire than the Lesbian sea,
Thy nails upon the cithern and their marks
Like quick faint painted moons upon my flesh,
My breasts aching with them and all my limbs
Trembling with sweat and the sweetness like a death!"

So in the spring night you remembered, Sappho.
(Whom Solon memorized and Plutarch called
"The heart of a volcano," letting drop
The drinking cup from his shamed fingers). So,
Small and dark, you stood upon the Cliff,
The brightness over the towers, and the sea
Stroking seven-stringed voluptuous octaves
Hollow and hoarse and violent. The night
Shook with the music of a thousand bugles
Mixed with the smell of streams and wet wind-flowers,
Gardens of the rose and hyacinth,
River-beds burning with the oleander
And wild pomegranate, olive groves and fountains
Where dreamed the cyclamen and violet
With feathery maiden-hair; the fragrant grass
Beneath your feet was silvered an inch thick
With dew like frost; some black soaked branches dripped

Heavily jewelled darkness down like dew.
You shivered, and the silver shadows crept
Over your body like remembered fingers. . . .
Now the sea walks with moonlight on her hands—
And ah, the nightingale!
"O sing no more!
Sing on, and let me not remember more!
Let me forget false love and false delight,
Forget that I am old, that I am tired,
No longer delicate and desirable!
If thee Cyprus or Paphos or Panormos—
But no, the golden hounds are leashed, the doves
Are hooded. Even She has quite forgotten,
In whose cold temple all my chaplets hang,
And trophies spotted with my tears and blood.
The song is done. The nightingale is finished.
It is the end. I see a phantom plow
And phantom horses cutting a quiet furrow
Through ghostly distances. I see the sun—
Stand face to face, friend . . . and unveil the grace
That grows within thine eyes. . . . It is the end.
Thy wisdom was my wisdom, Cytherea—
It breaks me—and I give you back the shell. . . ."

The crested kingfisher, trapped in a turbulent *If*,
Who sees the water and rejects the cliff,
And splits the mirrored image of despair,
Shattering the glassed and agitated hair—
And leaving only a little shadow there.

If you would sing of heroes, sing of her
For she was young and dauntless, unafraid
In Sodom's chaos; nothing could deter
That backward look where beating brimstone played;
Those loyal eyes cost her brief flesh and blood.
Tell us no tale of shame or wickedness
Only how faith and courage at the flood
Became a white and shining loveliness.
So let the gleaming pillar on the plain
Rebuke safe cowards running from the past:
They make no salt beneath a fiery rain,
No savor of their little deeds will last.
But when Lot's wife put on her crystal shroud
The sky saluted and Prometheus bowed!

—ELIZABETH MORROW
Lot's Wife

Letter to *Lot's Wife*

That wild look back! That curious lovely fault
Frozen into elegiac salt!
That glittering epitaph! That dazzling death
Wistful and impudent and out of breath!
That lift of throat! That challenge of the chin!
That gaze dilated, fierce and feminine,
Drinking the sulphur, mouth and nostrils wide,
Eyes flashing—the flash fixed as it defied!

What bliss were it to wander like a waif
Remembering how lovely, how unsafe,
How sweet, how marvelously sweet and sharp
It was to live once and to hear the harp
Drawn like a silver track of blood that lingers
In the hot furrow of the long-nailed fingers
Encased in shell of gold; to hear the singers

Black-curled, with oil of cassia and clove,
And silks as savage as the lamps that move
In a green darkness where the leopards rove
And antelopes go humid-eyed with love
And forests steam with incense and the grove
Moans with monotonous lutes and even the dove
With the warm bubbling of his throat whereof
The sound is as a subtle garment wove
All in one tint—so was it to live once
When day and night the feverish orisons
Of love went up in rich perpetual pain
From the high altar fragrant with the stain
Of milk-white goats, the beautiful, the slain.

Then too there were the strange delicious rites
Ushered with shadowy prefaces and lights
From branches painted with such fervent cunning
Of chrysoprase and ochre, the girls running
In shrill swift frenzied files, their stained hair streaming
Like flame blown back, the gilded serpents gleaming
In angry bracelets at their wrists and screaming,
The daggers drunk with blood, the vine-topped wands
Shaking like hair and music in their hands
That no man looks upon and lives, no beast
Encounters and escapes. And then the feast
Of Syrian Adonis when the streets
Of Sodom rang with stallions whose hoof-beats
Filled the bright air with bells. The cavalcade
Blew horns like lilies and the horses neighed,

Rattling the golden disks their manes displayed,
And the red trumpets of the Priestess brayed,
And through the summer solstice youth and maid
And priest with black beard threaded scarlet swayed
In slow processional frieze with silver basket
And jewel-frosted jar until the casket
Loomed huge and purple whereon, pale in death,
The young god dreamed himself from stone to breath.

Such flutes and flowers! And my golden shawl!
My hair just so, with Tyrian interval
Terraced, and dripping nard and dropping gum
Oozed odourously out of labdanum!
Such crowding and such jostling at the doors
Three-plated, the king's horses on all fours
Rising up sheer and shining like black waves
With silver crests! The soldiers! And the knaves
Nudging and slitting purses! And the veils
Of muslin torn! The oaths! The shrieks! The wails!
The love-girls with their eyes like jewels blue
Half-shut in silver lids, and skins like dew,
And with embroideries wherein stags strive
With jaguars and seem, bleeding, more alive
In the spun conflict that our looms contrive
Than ever on the actual hills! That hush!
The song poured out like fire from a bush:

"O Queen that lovest Golgi and the hum
Of the honied thighs that haunt Idalium

And Eryx, Aphrodite that with gold
Playest, lo, from out Acheron's hell-hold
They have brought back to thee Adonis—even
In the twelfth month they have brought back your Heaven.
They, the neat-ankled Hours, tardiest
Of the Immortals; at our dear behest
Always they come to us, the secret Hours
With treasure in their hands and eyes like flowers.
Therefore, for thy delight, O Thou of names
Innumerable and temples, fruits like flames
That tall trees burst with, lie before him, and
The delicate gardens, cakes from Samarkand,
Knitted in kneading trays, the white wheat meal
And blossoms pounded with a golden wheel
In olive oil, with paste of figs and grapes
Of pearl, in flying and in creeping shapes
Wrought. . . . Lo, here are set before him, here
Green bowers heavy with tender anise, where
The little Loves go fluttering here and there
Like infant nightingales from bough to bough.
O the gold, the ebony! (And sleepest thou?)
O the twin eagles of white ivory
That carry the cupbearer! O the cloak
Of purple strewn more soft than sleep or smoke!
So will Miletus say and whoso heeds
The sheep in Samos. . . . All night the Cyprian feeds
On the gold-bearded lips. . . . But cold with rain
The dawn drifts as we take our god again
Down to the beach, and with dishevelled hair

And raiment unrestrained and bosom bare
Begin our song, the while Adonis dead
Is by the waves broken once more for bread."

How should it profit you to walk hereafter,
The sistrum clashing soft seductive laughter
Like ear-rings at the warm cave of your ears,
With sound of sackbuts and with dulcimers,
Persuasive shawns, the delicate lewd noise
From arrassed chambers of the painted boys,
The ardent baths veined green with shapes that swim
Inquisitively under liquid limb
And liquid hair in vapour pearly dim?
Could there be such a sweet death in the keees
Again, such sick imperial sins as these?
Such godlike weariness when for an hour
We crush between our teeth the fiery flower?
What! Would you drag a pillow or a shawl
Out of the fallen house, the falling wall
And think to cheat your frugal mountain home
With jasper hairpin or a jewelled comb
Rescued from chaos like some old wives' tale
Mumbled at twilight when the functions fail
And memory is bleak and passion stale—
The sanguinary slow rehearsal pale
With marks of old blood from Gomorrah's Grail?

Nay, but to follow him, the high, the holy
Husband, hold his hand and go up slowly

Into the hills, forsooth to Zoar, follow
A fabulous Lord into a foreign hollow!
Resume the barren worship that denies
The hot immediate magic of the eyes!
Nay, but to grow old in a strange land, grow
Old amid strangers, knowing what you know,
Toothless, with few white hairs and eyes burned out,
A foolish hag that mutters, hobbling about
Upon a stick and telling stories none
Believes, or else, pretending, eggs you on
Only to laugh into your dazed face, only
To have you muttering still, bewildered, lonely,
Searching in every smile a feeble hope
Of credence! Nay, but to grow blind and grope
In the tent's darkness from the sun's cruel night
And hear an old familiar cough and fight
A thousand times the impulse to creep slowly,
Softly up on him, the high, the holy,
And stop his cough and whining to his Lord
With the quick wisdom of a twist of cord.

Therefore, the pulse bell-toned like birds that brood
In the young summer of the branching blood,
The three gold pendants of Queen Ashtoreth
Ajar, the ankle-rings a-jingle, breath
Drawn full, sustained, you turned your face to death,
Wheeling as wheels the heron to her doom,
Or as the swan rides on a rigid plume
Mirrored in final music, or at gloom

Of green dusk quail will quit their mates to come
After the fowler's pipe, or in her tomb
Like one red rose the phoenix will resume
Her fiery identity. . . .

To refuse
This moment were a winter of abuse
And folly; but to grasp it and to use
The Soul out in a swift Forever whose
Instant cannot perish but renews
Eternity with time. . . . I turn! I choose!
Ah God! It is an easy thing to lose
Thy favour, to put off my broidered shoes
Lined with a scarlet wool and with the doe's
Moon-spotted skin made beautiful, to close
The golden bitter chapter with a rose
Pressed down in tears of blood between the prose
And the fierce poem this my madness knows.

That look! I have seen it somewhere! I have known
That sidelong stare—half starriness, half stone!
Not quite all stone as yet, the balls as yet
Still bright, still quick, like moons before they set!
But the heart heavy with the secret frost;
The silver edict gripping the hair tossed
Over the tawny shoulder twisted thus;
The face flushed, terrified, tumultuous
With flame whose violent shadows seem to scorch
The blood—till in a breath the golden torch

Of that small face is turned to fiery sleet!
That little mirror of Gomorrah's heat
Precipitated into crystal so
You cannot say if it be fire or snow!
Even the lurid shadows quite congealed—
In the swift act of flickering stopped and sealed!
That look! That long reluctant lonely look!
So like a child's that cannot leave her book
All dark and admirable with monsters, deep
In such delight, dragged off to prayer and sleep
Sullenly. . . .
And you, aroused, superb,
Asserting the proud pronoun, the proud verb;
Confounding with the quiet phrase, "I am!"
The grim and crimson God of Abraham;
Flinging into that carnal beard the word
Older, wiser, taller than the Lord,
More royal and more radiant than He,
More God, more valid in divinity.

The cautious disputant, the son-in-law
Of Abraham who saw the thing he saw
And all his years saw nothing, even Lot
Succumbed to tacit death upon his cot,
Groaning, inglorious, forgotten save
As you are not beside him in his grave
Of worms and mortal dissolution. Turn
Always, O Woman, look you back and burn
In frost, yourself your monument—and urn!

O dear and undecaying Lady, now
As then, as always, you shall show men how
Upon the desperate occasion rings
A woman's scorn of man-invented Kings,
The Gods proposed by frightened man to give
A reason for his terror, to deceive
Your courage to his cowardice, your trust
To his soft moral-coated puny lust!

POSTSCRIPT

What is a letter without some excuse,
By way of postscript, for a *coup de grâce?*
If well employed, it is a charming ruse,
A diamond heel upon a hated face,
King led from Queen and trumped by lowly Deuce,
A woman's trick for taking time and space—
And yet, when all is said, what is a letter
That lacks this (how the French call) *raison d'être?*

How doth the little busy bee improve
Each shining hour and head he lights upon:
So doth a lady when she is in love
Write postscripts that she wastes her nights upon;
Stout burghers, whom the well-known symptoms move,
Spoil more pens than a poet bites upon
In giving vent to that same pleasant fury
Which some day will delight a judge and jury.

I would not for the world stand Platitude
Upon its head and call it Paradox:
It is a vulgar passion, quite as crude
As that which prompts the Devil when he mocks
His image in a lady neither lewd
Nor yet unlovely with or without frocks. . . .
So I believe in good old-fashioned sinning—
Although our present crop of oats is thinning.

And yet there never was a time, I warrant,
When people tried so desperately hard
To be so bad: for virtue is abhorrent—
(That is, the sort that is its own reward).
Now sin and liquor make a messy torrent—
Both bootleg. And still virtue is abhorred
By flaming age and youth who never sleep,
But do such things as make the angels weep—

If there are any angles left to do so,
With angels and with weeping out of fashion—
Along with reverence and Robinson Crusoe
And quiet mind and more than moment's passion
And simple faith and marriage sans a trousseau
And no paternal wedding cheque to cash in. . . .
But then this stuff, old thing, is—well—Victorian;
Hardly the vehicle to ride to glory in.

There are a thousand sins for every virtue;
You choose the kind with which you are congenial:
Too much of being very good may hurt you;
Then leave the decent business to the menial:
Sin—and be damned to cuttlefish that squirt you
With ink that is a trifle extra-venial;
But this above all: syndicate it first—
Or you can sin and sin until you burst!

So be as bad as possible—at profit;
Not like to these, such dear dead girls, who, even

In spite of splendid sins, must freeze in Tophet,
Or, in despite of virtue, burn in Heaven,
Unware that bread, no matter how you stuff it
With raisins, will not rise without some leaven. . . .
Though satyrs go to church and nymphs reform,
Great sin is still the taking of Heaven by storm!

¶Letters to Women is set in Monotype Baskerville. The frontispiece and decorations are from original woodcuts by Clare Leighton. Format by A. W. Rushmore. Set up, printed and bound by The Plimpton Press, Norwood, Massachusetts.

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